



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CUSHING, MAINE

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The town of Cushing graces the west bank of the lower St. George River and includes Gay Island, across Pleasant Point Gut from the tip of the Cushing peninsula. Comprising roughly 8600 acres, Cushing is bounded by the towns of St. George and South Thomaston across the river to the east, by Thomaston and Warren to the north and by Friendship to the west.

Long inhabited by Indians, the area appears first to have been visited by Europeans in 1605 when members of an English expedition explored Cushing's shores in the ship Archangel, under the command of Captain George Waymouth. They were followed by fur traders who occupied temporary outposts, then by a few intrepid fishermen and farmers. As early as 1635 two families were reported to be living on the St. George River.

Settlement was promoted by General Samuel Waldo, an enterprising Bostonian, who acquired rights to a vast wilderness tract which included the St. George's valley. In 1736 he began deeding over land in the area, having offered each settler 100 acres of "good Soil & a healthy climate." His advertisements neglected to mention the recurring French and Indian wars, which discouraged most prospects. Too few were lured from New Hampshire and Massachusetts to the west, so Waldo aggressively recruited poor and oppressed Scottish and Irish emigrants to settle in his lower St. Georges plantation. Those who accepted Waldo's offer became subsistence farmers and fishermen, living under harsh conditions, largely isolated from the inland communities by dense forest and menaced by hostile Indians. The fighting ended in 1759, but Cushing remained a frontier settlement of simple log houses clustered along the water, heavily dependent on commerce by sea. Raids by British ships and Tory privateers increased the community's hardship and isolation

during the revolutionary War, forcing its hardy pioneers to rely increasingly upon themselves.

When the colonies won their independence, Maine remained part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. On January 28, 1789 the lower St. Georges plantation, which extended over both sides of the river, was incorporated as the Town of Cushing, named after Massachusetts' Lieutenant Governor. (St. George, on the east side of the river, was not set off and incorporated as a separate town until February 7, 1803.) Cushing grew slowly and reluctantly. It refused to support a public school until forced to do so by a Massachusetts grand jury presentment in 1800; it steadfastly resisted providing funds for a minister; and its first meeting house was not built until 1808. Gradually, however, school districts were established and primitive roads were laid out and cleared, providing a measure of relief when British ships again harassed the coastal settlements and choked off commerce by sea during the War of 1812.

In 1820 the Maine Constitution was adopted, creating the independent state of Maine. At the time Cushing had 600 residents and 75, presumably crowded, dwellings. Adjoining communities bustled with ship building and related trades as the maritime trade entered its "Golden Age," but Cushing did not share in the prosperity. The more ambitious of its citizens left to pursue business elsewhere. Those who remained were still farmers and fishermen, poor but largely self-sufficient. (A contemporary report noted that Cushing had no "settled minister, lawyer, physician, tanner, tailor or shoemaker" and only one meeting house.) They were a proud and independent lot. They turned aside proposals to build a bridge to Friendship for 28 years until ordered to do so by the District Court in 1848. During the Civil War, the Town, on several occasions, voted against filling its quota under the draft and refused to provide financial support for its volunteers. The Town also remained largely fragmented, consisting of many small communities, scattered stores, three churches and up to seven separate school districts.

Although its population reached a high of 805 in 1880, Cushing did not share in the burgeoning economic growth following the Civil War. Coastal schooners carried ice, lime and granite to Boston and New York from local ponds, kilns and quarries, but not from Cushing. In 1882 attempts to establish ice and granite businesses were made and soon abandoned. While the town's limited resources may have constrained local enterprise, there was, apparently, resistance to change. At the celebration of its one-hundredth anniversary on July 4, 1889, Cushing's citizens were admonished for their "restrictive and unprogressive spirit" which had rejected "opportunities fraught with unmeasured possibilities" and turned away "the stream of material prosperity." Perhaps because poor weather limited attendance at the anniversary celebration, the speech did not spur economic development.

As railroads and steamships made Maine more accessible to vacationers from urban areas to the west, some of them discovered Cushing. In 1872 Captain Sam Hathorne began taking in summer boarders at his home on Hathorne Point. His example was soon followed by others. Over time Cushing's unspoiled natural setting,

its abandoned farms and quiet coves attracted increasing numbers of summer vacationers and artists. They included Andrew Wyeth, whose paintings, notably "Christina's World," have drawn many visitors to the Olson House (formerly, Sam Hathorne's home.)

From its 1880 high, the Town's census fell steadily to 350 in 1930, as changing conditions and diminishing resources forced many farmers and fishermen to move elsewhere. Gradually, however, they have been replaced by lobstermen, commuters and retirees "from away" who have swelled Cushing's population to more than 1000 permanent residents. Broad Cove, site of the Town's original meeting house, had been its geographic and municipal center. It remains the focal point today with the elementary school, the firehouse and the landmark Fales Store, which had been operated by seven generations of the Fales family and continues business in its 1889 building.

The Town has accommodated to change with improved roads and participation in a regional school district, but it retains its insular character, lacking any motel, restaurant or public landing. Despite its vacation homes and pleasure boats, Cushing is a reflection of its past: a community which, by location and by inclination, remains well of the beaten path.